

February 9, 2023

Dear Chair Nelson,

I am writing to strongly support House File 981 which would require adult sized changing tables.

I am Robert Wagner. I have worked on behalf of and with people with disabilities for the past four decades. Currently, I am a semi working psychologist. Also, as a volunteer I serve on the MNCCD Board (Minnesota Coalition Citizens with Disabilities) as well as on The Arc Minnesota's public policy committee. Previously, I worked as a supervisor and interim manager at Ramsey County's disability services for nearly two decades.

Importantly, 18 years ago a large Pacific wave swept me up and dashed me upon the turf, thereby breaking my neck and damaging my spinal cord. Until then, I didn't have a clue what it was like to bathroom in the community if one wasn't able-bodied. I hadn't experienced it nor did I have a close friend or family member physically disabled. Typically, one doesn't know what they haven't experienced. Using a wheelchair these past 18 years and needing to use public restrooms has been an eye-opener. The pandemic also amplified how inadequate bathrooms typically are. Bathrooms are designed for able-bodied folks. Paper dispensers, soap and hand sanitizer as well as changing tables are at a height or people who can stand. Changing tables are a size for babies and toddlers.

Smart, universal design would design changing tables that would serve All Sizes. They would still work for children. Soap dispensers would be at a height a child or someone using a wheelchair could access. Of course, able-bodied individuals would easily access all of the above items. Changing tables which don't allow for all sizes doesn't take into account that some individuals need changing tables from birth through their senior years. Others, like myself, have those needs from midlife through my senior years. I have no doubt that it's unintentional, we just haven't been designing buildings with everyone's needs in mind. We might as well we put a sign on the entry door "For Able-Bodied Individuals Only." Though unintentional, it harkens back to previous decades when we had signs such as "no women allowed" or "only blacks allowed".

I'm sure there's a cost to this change. When ADA was passed, there was an outcry about the cost of retrofitting buses, trains and doing curb cutouts. Now, it's expected and normalized. But, imagine the cost of not being included as a regular, full community member. Not having a bathroom designed for all in mind, keeps some individuals from using public amenities, businesses or holding down a job.

Adult changing tables are really a human right, don't you think? If you had a daughter or mother who needed to use the bathroom but the bathroom didn't take into account her needs, I'm guessing you would support this change. All community members have a right to access the community, take advantage of public and private amenities as well as work in those buildings. If a bathroom isn't accessible to them, that's a huge barrier.

I implore all committee members to support this simple change. You have the power to continue the long evolution of full integration for people with disabilities. Let's back our sentiments with action by designing buildings so all are welcome. If you decide you can't vote for this bill, that's your right. Remember though, it's as if you're putting a sign on the front door "able-bodied folks ONLY welcome here," because that's the reality of doing nothing.

Sincerely,

Robert M Wagner